

## [Janie Solomon]

Gibson Mill

Concord, N.C.

September 7, 1938

M. L. W.

JANIE SOLOMON

She sat on the edge of the bare front porch and nursed her baby son, a frail, dark-haired woman with a pale face and sad black eyes. Beside her was a crutch, padded at the top with worn blue corduroy. Two little girls sprawled near her on the porch floor; an older girl sat on the steps and smoked a cigarette with as much display as possible.

There was no furniture on the porch which had not (?) taken on the color of the red clay front yard. But a dirty, split-bottom chair was brought forth by the daughter with the cigarette and the two little girls made me welcome by standing very close to me and grinning broadly. They were pretty little girls even if they were unwashed and uncombed; from their wrists down to their bare toes they too seemed to have acquired the color of the dusty front yard.

The woman shifted the nursing child frequently. He was a large boy for his sixteen months, but he became fretful when she took him away from her breasts. And no wonder. Every inch of his face, his arms and the body showing above his overalls was covered with an eruption resembling prickly heat. The woman didn't know what it was, but a neighbor suggested it might be poison oak.

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The two little girls giggled because the baby still had sweet potato smeared on his face from dinner.

Janie Armstrong Solomon, the mother of the household, was born thirty-five years ago in Rock Hill, South Carolina. She was one of the eight children of a preacher “who moved about from place to place.” A case of spinal meningitis when she was two years old left Janie with a twisted leg and a deformed foot so she has “never knowed what it is to go without a crutch.” She says her illness must have made her nervous too because she couldn't bear to stay in school, so after trying it several years, she gave it up entirely. Janie doesn't remember exactly how old she was when she started to work in the mill, but she must have been about twelve or thirteen. She started going to night school in Rock Hill, and finally got as high as the sixth grade, then when she was seventeen she married Mr. Solomon, who was twenty years her senior and a widower with two children. Her marriage meant the end of school and the end of steady work, but Janie went back to the mill between babies when she was able and could find a place. She has always worked as a spooler, standing supported by her crutch; she says she got used to it and didn't mind.

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From the first things didn't go so well with the Solomon family. They moved about in South Carolina, then to Gastonia where most of Janie's family lived, and on to ConCord where they stayed. Life has become harder in recent years. Janie talks about it in the weary voice of resignation:

“It looks like I've had more sickness and trouble than any one woman can stand.

“Five year ago my husband took what you'd call a real old-fashioned case of the typhoid fever, and was sick for four months. When he was getting over that, he swelled up with the artheritis rheumatism and was just about bent double with it. He aint never been able to work regular since then.

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"Sometimes when he gets in the bed at night after he's worked all dry he breaks down and cries because his joints aches him so bad. We've spent every cent I could rake together and all my family and his'n could give us to try to cure him, but it looks like there won't / nothing make him well again.

"Last year he got what I thought was sore eyes. One morning he called me to come there, he couldn't see nothing. When I looked at his eyes, the balls was as red as a piece of raw liver all over. The doctors 4 said it come from his teeth, and Mr. White over at the WPA paid to have them every one took out. After they was pulled, he could see again, but hit didn't help his artheritis nary bit.

"Then last summer he took awful sick with the malarial and we had to get Dr. Burns in to cure him. I don't reckon I'll ever get all the doctor bills paid up."

When he's able now, Mr. Solomon runs the elevator at the Gibson Mill, but usually he doesn't work more then two or three days a week. Sometimes he earns 50¢ or so from renting out a bony horse and an old plow he owns. Of course, the horse has to be fed, but Janie said it could just about pick its living in the summertime.

The oldest Solomon girl, who is seventeen, works in the mill when she is able, but she has "the low blood pressure and dizzy spells so that she falls right over sometimes." She's been having ear trouble too and was at the doctor's office the afternoon I met the rest of the family. Janie says the girl has been trying all summer to got t job in the mill, but work has been so slack they were laying hands off instead of hiring them.

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Janie supports the family. She works at the WPA sewing room for \$14.72 every two weeks. The little girls will tell you proudly their mother is an "inspector." She began in the sewing room as a regular worker about six mouths ago, but then was promoted to the position of inspector and overseer. The hours are the same as they would be in the mill —

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eight hours — but she likes the work better because she can sit down. Besides it isn't as wearing as mill work.

The rent on the dingy six-room house the family occupies is \$16 a month. It wouldn't be so high if the house belonged to the mill, but no one in the family works steadily enough to be eligible for a company dwelling. St. Charles St., on which their house is situated, is not a part of a village although it is near several mills. Many of the people on the street own their own homes.

Janie says she can't really manage on what she gets — she just gets along the best way she knows how. The WPA helps out sometimes. They gave her two dresses each for both the little girls who go to school this fall. Janie was determined her children would look decent when they started to school, so she watched the papers and when Belks advertised material for 7¢ 6 a yard, she bought enough for two dresses each. “I thank the Lord I can sew,” she added fervently. “When I was a young'un I couldn't run and play and cut up like the others, so I set in the house and learned to make things. I wouldn't have the job I've got now if I hadn't.”

Some help has come recently in a way Janie hadn't counted on. She pointed to the girl who had been smoking a cigarette and said to me “Do you know how old that girl is?” I looked at the girl in the tight green dress. She was short and plump, her black hair was plastered down by a freshly done finger wave she had given herself, her features were bold but immature. I guessed she was fourteen.

“She's nearbout sixteen,” Janie said, “and three months ago she run off and got married.”

The girl glowed with importance and spoke in her blunt, casual manner. “Mama cried when I done it.”

“Yes, I did. She was so little and young she didn't know what she was a-doing. But now I'm glad she married. She's got a good, hardworking man — he's up at the Locke (Mill) — and

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they're staying upstairs so that helps us out. I know'd too that I couldn't give her the things she ought to have, and her man can."

The married daughter became very valuable after her true status was revealed. She gave a detailed 7 account of the no-count man her step-sister married; she told why she left school at the end of the sixth grade (her mother said it was because she had marrying in her head); she explained that she was "feeling puny," meaning that she was pregnant. Then she ordered one of the younger girls to get a broom and sweep the yard which she declared "looks like a trash pile." The child ran for a broom and began to sweep so vigorously we were submerged under a yellow cloud for a while.

Janie finds her greatest — and practically her only — pleasure in life in her children. "Me and my husband both think the world of them," she will tell you, "and we don't never want a one of them to leave us." She looked down at the child in her arms. "This here is the only boy we've got — I'm scared sometimes that we think too much of him."

The Solomons do not have a radio or a car, and they do not go to the movies. They use kerosene lamps for lighting the house in order to save money. The children go to the Baptist Sunday School on Winecoff Street, but Janie says since she's been working she hardly ever gets out to church. Every Saturday morning her brother who is a preacher at the Gospel Tabernacle, broadcasts from [Gastonia?], and Janie likes to go to a 8 neighbors to hear him. "But I don't get to hear him much no more," she remarked wistfully. As she stroked the baby's head, I noticed Janie's hands had pink polished nails.

I left the house as Mr. Solomon came in from a neighbor's turnip patch with his horse and plow. The little group on the porch watched at go. Then they followed Janie as she went into the house still holding the baby to her breast with her free arm.